

THE WOMAN, THE CHILD AND THE DRAGON
Revelation chapter 12 (NIV)

*A great sign appeared in heaven: **a woman** clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red **dragon** with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her **child** the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.*

*Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that **ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan**, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

*“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his **Messiah**. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by **the blood of the Lamb** and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*

Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”

*When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of **her offspring —those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus**.*

Revelation was written by the apostle John, around AD 70, and sent to seven churches that were being persecuted for the gospel of Christ. He wrote a pastoral letter to strengthen their witness. Yet Revelation provokes extreme responses in many Christians. They either love it or they hate it. The structure of the book, and its imagery, seem puzzling to the modern reader. For some, it is a wonderful cryptic puzzle from which they think they work out the detailed course of history. Others read with confusion and struggle to find much spiritual help. Christians hold different interpretations for Revelation. Humility means we admit our explanation could be wrong, and we change our view when the Bible points to a different understanding.

John’s complex symbolic prophecies still challenge and renew us today. God wants his people throughout all ages to read and benefit from this book, so that we, with “*patient endurance*” (1:9), can be faithful to Christ. Revelation challenges us to avoid complacency and compromise, and remain faithful in times of persecution. John looks behind the scenes where an ongoing spiritual battle continues. Revelation gives us timeless truths for living with the cosmic struggle between good and evil, though God alone is God. This is something that has to be understood and worked out in each generation.

Instead of the repeated “*And I saw*”, John writes, “*A great and wondrous sign appeared*” (1). This is the first vision in Revelation that is called a “sign”. He wants us to pay special attention to chapter 12, the centre

point of Revelation. Two visions describe the major turning points of history. Previously, the seventh trumpet announced the victory of God: *"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever"* (11:15). Chapter 12 also heralds the coming of God's kingdom: *"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah"* (10). This victory is centred on the birth of a special Child. There is no doubt the kingdom comes through Christ. It is the central message that matters. The main point is clear: God will finally establish his rule. This has already happened through Christ's first coming: *"The time has come,"* Jesus said. *"The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"* (Mark 1:15). But the kingdom of God is yet to reach its consummation at the return of Christ. The "not yet" builds on the "already".

In the intervening period, between the two advents of Christ, God's people face the continuing opposition of the evil one *"who leads the whole world astray"* (9). To believers pressured by compromise and persecution, John's message was both challenging and comforting. Salvation is available to everyone. The self-sacrifice of Christ allows for the forgiveness of sins and fellowship with God. In Christ, the new age has begun, but the old is yet to end. Christ's resurrection and the coming of the Spirit are proofs that God's reign has already begun. The future reign of God is nurtured by the present reality of that reign.

The strange symbols and pictures of Revelation have a meaning that is far beyond themselves, with several layers of meaning. The three main characters are the pregnant woman, her promised child and the evil dragon. The symbols represent not a literal woman and a literal dragon, but something more; the child represents a human person. The sun, moon and stars show that these events have cosmic significance. They also link the woman with Israel (Genesis 37:9). The woman represents a number of things blended together. She is not an individual. She represents God's people, the community of faith; at first the faithful remnant of Israel, and then the Church, *"the Jerusalem from above...our mother"* (Galatians 4:26).

The woman represents God's people in every age. Genesis 3:15 points forward to the defeat of the serpent by a future descendant of the woman: *"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* A later view identified the woman as Mary the mother of Jesus. As the woman gives birth to the "male child", the dragon tries to kill him. Verses 2 and 6 remind us of Herod's attempts to kill the child Jesus, and the flight to Egypt. Verse 5 has significant references to the Messiah. Compare *"Who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre"* with Psalm 2:7-9, and Revelation 2:26-27; and 19:15. "To rule" means literally "to shepherd." The "iron sceptre" means firmness, not tyranny.

The *"enormous red dragon"* (3), identified in verse 9, is the enemy of God and his people, the evil one. The dragon with its 10 horns, refers to the prophecies of Daniel (7:7, 20, 23-25). As in Daniel, the dragon represents evil political powers that persecute the Church, and also their evil leader, Satan. The colour red is associated with death (6:4). Jesus called the devil *"a murderer, a liar and the father of lies."* (John 8:44). As a deceiver and a liar, he cannot be trusted. The crowned heads and horns represent his authority and his power exercised over government and society, who are the instruments for his fury against God's people. This is the *"ancient serpent"* (9) who led Eve astray. Satan accused Job of serving God for what he could get out of it. In Zechariah, Satan is the accuser of Joshua the high priest (3:1-2). In the NT Satan is the seducer of people using every wile (Eph. 6:11) and scheme (2 Cor. 2:11) to tempt people to sin, and to disobey God.

You could identify verses 1-4 with the OT age. In verse 5 we have the life and ministry of Jesus in one verse: *"She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.' And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne."* By moving from his birth to his enthronement in heaven, John emphasizes that Satan has been defeated by Jesus' incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation. Verse 6 covers the centuries since: *"The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days"*. Like Hagar, Moses and Elijah, she finds in the desert a place of spiritual safety, and the provision of her needs. God's people live as "aliens and strangers" in the desert of a fallen and hostile world, while our true home is in heaven (1 Peter 2:11). In the OT, trouble

and persecution are likened to an overwhelming flood (Psalm 32:6; 42:7; 124:4). Perhaps the imagery of water in flood (15-16) may represent Satan releasing a flood of evil, such as mob violence, against the Church. In every age, government action against the Church has often been based on popular demand.

Most likely the 1260 days is a conventional symbol for a period of trouble and persecution (6). The 1260 days (11:3), like the 42 months (13:5), or the three and half years, *"a time, times and half a time"* (12:14), all cover the same period, namely the entire age of the Church, between the first and second comings of Christ. Dispensationalists apply this number to the seven year tribulation as predicted in Daniel 9:24-27. Others understand this number as symbolic of God's protection of his witnessing Church in times of persecution. Whatever the interpretation, believers are called to witness for Christ knowing that victory is ultimately his. It is a short period in comparison with the limitless eternity of the new heaven and earth.

The image of *"two wings of a great eagle"* (14) refers to Exodus 19:4: *"You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself"*. It is further explained in Deut. 32:11, where the love, protection, strength, and watchfulness of God are compared to the eagle's qualities. As the young eagles were carried on the adult wings, and brought out of their nests and taught to fly, so the Lord had lovingly carried and safely delivered Israel.

The scene shifts to a war in heaven where the war has two phases: a heavenly and an earthly phase. The conflict between the two archangels, the good and the evil, is the perpetual conflict between Eve and the serpent, and between her offspring and its offspring, throughout history (Genesis 3:15). There is a hint of the original fall of Satan and his angels for attempting to usurp God's position. The sin that caused his fall was pride (1 Timothy 3:6). The dragon was overthrown and cast down to earth (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:11-19). Evil has no place in heaven. He took with him one third of the angels referred to as *"stars"* (4, Jude 6). Demons or evil spirits share his defeat. They are the *"powers"* that believers *"wrestle"* (Eph. 6:12). Satan's mission is to *"lead the whole world astray"* (9). In Daniel, Michael is the angelic protector of God's people (10:13-21; 12:1). This role now belongs to the ascended Christ (Romans 8:34). Some understand this scene to refer to an actual spiritual battle at the end of time. But it is better to see it as a symbolic picture of Jesus' victory over Satan that Jesus referred to in Luke 10:18: *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven."*

In another age, this also describes the decisive victory over demonic powers that Christ won on the cross, demonstrated by his resurrection and ascension. The coronation of Christ was on a cross. It is also a verdict on the eventual outcome of this cosmic spiritual battle between kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. The outcome is the certain victory of God and his Christ. Ultimately, right and righteousness will triumph. Jesus' most characteristic miracle was the deliverance of people from satanic evil in the form of demon possession. This was a sign of the presence of the kingdom of God. Jesus said: *"If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"* (Matthew 12:28).

Although the devil has ultimately been defeated, he is at present active and vicious, cunning and malicious. Defeated and dangerous, he wages ongoing spiritual war to the end. He knows his time is short, so he comes to earth *"filled with fury"* (12) to destroy God's people. This is described symbolically as his pursuit of the woman: *"Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring —those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus"* (17), that is, the Church. Each generation has its antichrists but the supernatural evil behind them is the same. In every age, including our own, the struggle of Satan against the Church is fierce but futile. How extraordinary that the weak Church, with all its failures and contradictions ends up, by the grace of God, on the winning side!

Ejected from the eternity of God's presence, time is Satan's dilemma, or rather lack of time. He *"knows that his time is short"* (12). Trapped in time, he rages in frustration against time passing away. Facing future defeat, he is more dangerous. He rages at the new covenant community in Christ who are *"blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ"* (Ephesians 1:3). One of his strategies is to lie about

the Church. He deceives the unsaved into thinking God's people are dangerous and deluded. The message that Jesus has opened wide the door of eternity for all who will enter in, is a maddening provocation to Satan. He takes risks to cause as much damage as possible, and bring down as many as he can with him. The rising tempo of demonic activity and the forces of chaos in our time are the bad news, which verifies the good news, that Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. As the time of Christ's return draws near, we should expect Satan to intensify his efforts to disrupt God's plan of salvation with the darkness of deception. However, Satan cannot defeat God's plan for the restoration of humanity and the world. Satan is not equal to God; he is not all-powerful, all-knowing, or present everywhere. His power is limited.

"Satan" means "adversary"; the word "devil" means "slanderer" or "accuser." His names reveal his evil character. Like the first century believers, we also struggle with many of the same temptations: complacency, compromise, immorality, idolatry, false teaching, materialism—all are alive and well in our day. Like John's readers, we can expect to suffer for our faithful witness to Christ. The image of labour pains (2) reminds us that God's purposes are often accomplished only through suffering: *"With all these things the birth-pangs of the new age begin"* (Matthew 24:8; cf John 16:21 - 22; Rom. 8:22 - 23). We experience the attacks of the devil as we live faithfully and consistently in a world system opposed to God. He accuses us with condemnation and guilt, but Satan has been defeated by the person and the work of Christ on the cross.

Everything, including our right standing with God, our eternal security and our daily walk in Christ's victory, flows from the cross of Christ. We can overcome the devil by living and proclaiming the gospel of Christ faithfully. In a difficult book such as Revelation, it is more important, not debate various interpretations, but to focus on what is clear: Satan's opposition against us, Jesus Christ's defeat of him, and his accusations, and the call of world evangelism. It is Jesus, not Caesar or Satan, who is the Lord of history,

Satan can no longer accuse the people of God because Jesus has taken our sin and become the slain Lamb, our atoning sacrifice. He is interceding for us in heaven. Death has been conquered by his resurrection so that believers do not shrink from a witness that may lead to their deaths. Romans 8:31-39 proclaims the same message. Our responsibility is to resist Satan knowing he will flee: *"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you"* (James 4:7). God has provided us with spiritual armour that is more than sufficient to withstand any attack by Satan (Ephesians 6:10-20).

May God give us a deeper insight into the triumph of the cross of Christ. It marks the decisive defeat of demonic powers: *"Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross"* (Colossians 2:15). This picture, familiar in the Roman world, is that of a triumphant general leading a parade of victory through Rome, as a public spectacle. Christ is the conquering general and the "powers and authorities" are the defeated enemy displayed as the spoils of battle. We believers claim our part in that victory, and demonstrate that we already share in the future kingdom, in three ways: Our personal faith that *"the blood of the Lamb"* is the finished work of Christ and the guarantee of our acceptance; Our public confession of faith in God and his ways, *"the word of their testimony"*; and our refusal to compromise on that witness in the face of opposition, even death: *"they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death"* (11). It is a way of total commitment to God; it is normal Christianity.

This principle of singleness of heart runs through the gospels: *"Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."* (Matthew 10:38-39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24). Crucifixion is a startling image for discipleship. A disciple must deny himself (die to self-will), take up his cross (embrace God's will, no matter the cost), and follow Christ. As the image of Christ is formed in us as God's people (2 Corinthians 3:18), we demonstrate to the world that Satan is not its ruler, that there is a greater power than his, and the glory of the risen Christ deprives Satan of the worship he craves.

APPLICATION TO DAILY LIFE

1. How do you understand spiritual warfare? (see verse 11) How does the Spirit help us to apply the victory of the cross in our daily lives? Read 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 2:15; Romans 8:31-39.

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2. As a group, pray for all our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering persecution for their faith.